DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 254 847 CS 208 790

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TITLE Teaching Beginning Writing vs. Nurturing Beginning Writers.
PUB DATE Sep 84
NOTE 39p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Indiana Teachers of Writing Conference (4th, Indianapolis, IN, September 28-29, 1984).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Grade 1; Grade 2; *Language Acquisition; Primary Education; Sentence Structure; Spelling; *Teacher Role; Teaching Methods; Vocabulary Development; Writing Evaluation; *Writing Improvement; *Writing Instruction; *Writing Readiness; *Writing Research

ABSTRACT

To see what effects practice--frequent writing without teacher correction--would have on the writing of students in grades one and two in one small elementary school, writing samples were collected from all pupils at each grade level in October and May. Five factors were examined: general impression, length, vocabulary, spelling, and syntactic development. The students' teachers admitted that they had not been providing frequent opportunities for their pupils to write, but were willing to try this approach. Results showed significant improvement at both grade levels in all categories measured. The most interesting result was the startling variation in the amount of writing that individual children produced from day to day. It varied from only a few words one day to a hundred or more the next. The results indicate that, contrary to popular belief, many first grade students can write well at the beginning of the school year. Since children in first grade are already writing and are all learning to write correctly, the role of the teacher is not to teach beginning writing; rather it is to nurture beginning writers. (Tables of findings and writing samples are included.) (HOD)

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TEACHING BEGINNING WRITING VS. NURTURING BEGINNING WRITERS

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TEACHING BEGINNING WRITING VS. NURTURING BEGINNING WRITERS

"Recently a sixth-grade teacher explained that her class didn't write because they really hadn't learned the basic skills yet."

Evelyn Robinson in Educational Leadership, 1980.[1]

"The researchers found so many constraints imposed on writing instruction by forces outside the classroom that many elementary teachers are not teaching any writing lessons at all."

Education USA, 1981[2]

"Writing instruction in the elementary curriculum has been accorded a status so low that teachers are often uncertain whether they are supposed to teach writing."

Timothy Shanahan, Phi Delta Kappan, 1979.[3]

"The problem with writing is no writing."

Donald Graves, Language Arts, 1978.[4]

While considerable concern about the teaching of writing has been expressed recently in the professional literature and through the popular media, the status of writing in elementary classrooms is somewhat uncertain as the quotations above indicate. Unfortunately, the back-to-basics movement in general and the teaching of writing in particular have been more dominated by political interests than by concern for the needs of children and youth.

If children are not writing frequently in their elementary classrooms, they are being deprived of an essential learning experience. Furthermore, teachers who don't provide frequent opportunities for their pupils to write are being deprived of a rewarding teaching experience. Classroom teachers,

teacher educators, parents, administrators--all of us involved in elementary education--need to take a critical look at the role of writing in the elementary school.

A few years ago I participated in a project designed to improve the teaching of the communication skills in two urban elementary schools. My role was to collect and assess writing samples from all pupils in grades one through six and to work informally with teachers in the improvement of written composition. Although I had been teaching composition for almost thirty years at all levels--elementary, secondary, and college--two occurrences during this project forced me to take a new look at the way children learn to write.

1. First-grade teachers, and the two principals agreed, were certain that we could not collect writing samples in first grade because their pupils couldn't write. Therefore, we collected writing samples in grades two through six only.
2. As I worked with teachers and observed their classes, it was quite evident that there wasn't much writing going on at any grade level. By writing I mean the production of original text by children, putting ideas on paper, not copying, filling in blanks, sentence combining, or spelling and penmanship exercises.

It's difficult to improve writing when children aren't writing. Realizing that elementary teachers have a lot to do and that the correction of written composition was a real threat, I suggested that for a few weeks they try daily writing without teacher correction to see what would happen. About half of the forty teachers in the two schools agreed to give it a

try and about a fourth carried it out for a period of six weeks or longer.

Although all of the teachers who tried this daily writing without correction agreed that the writing of their pupils definitely improved, some were uncomfortable with this approach. They obviously felt that it was the teacher's job to correct the children's writing. The most dramatic results came in grades one and two where the teachers appeared to be less concerned with correction.

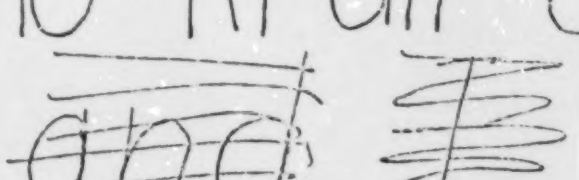
One first-grade teacher, whose pupils had done no writing previously, tried this approach. She reported that it was one of the most rewarding experiences she had had in a long teaching career. Her children wrote; they wrote well; and they loved to write. She and I both discovered that we could have collected writing samples from first graders.

(INSERT FIGURES 1,2, AND 3 HERE)

We found similar results in a "remedial" (low) second-grade class. Again in a classroom where children had not been writing, the improvement was dramatic. We had collected writing samples from this class in October. On a holistic score for general impression, all of the children in this class had received the lowest rating. On a second sample after approximately six weeks of daily writing, half of the children had improved by one level and one child was now above average. The teacher also reported definite improvement in reading which she attributed to the daily writing.

These second graders also enjoyed the daily writing. The teacher reported that they arrived in the morning asking what they were going to write about, and these were children who hadn't shown much previous interest in things academic.

When I was little I yout to krall on the flor.



Shelley

FIGURE 1 SHELLEY MARCH, GRADE 1

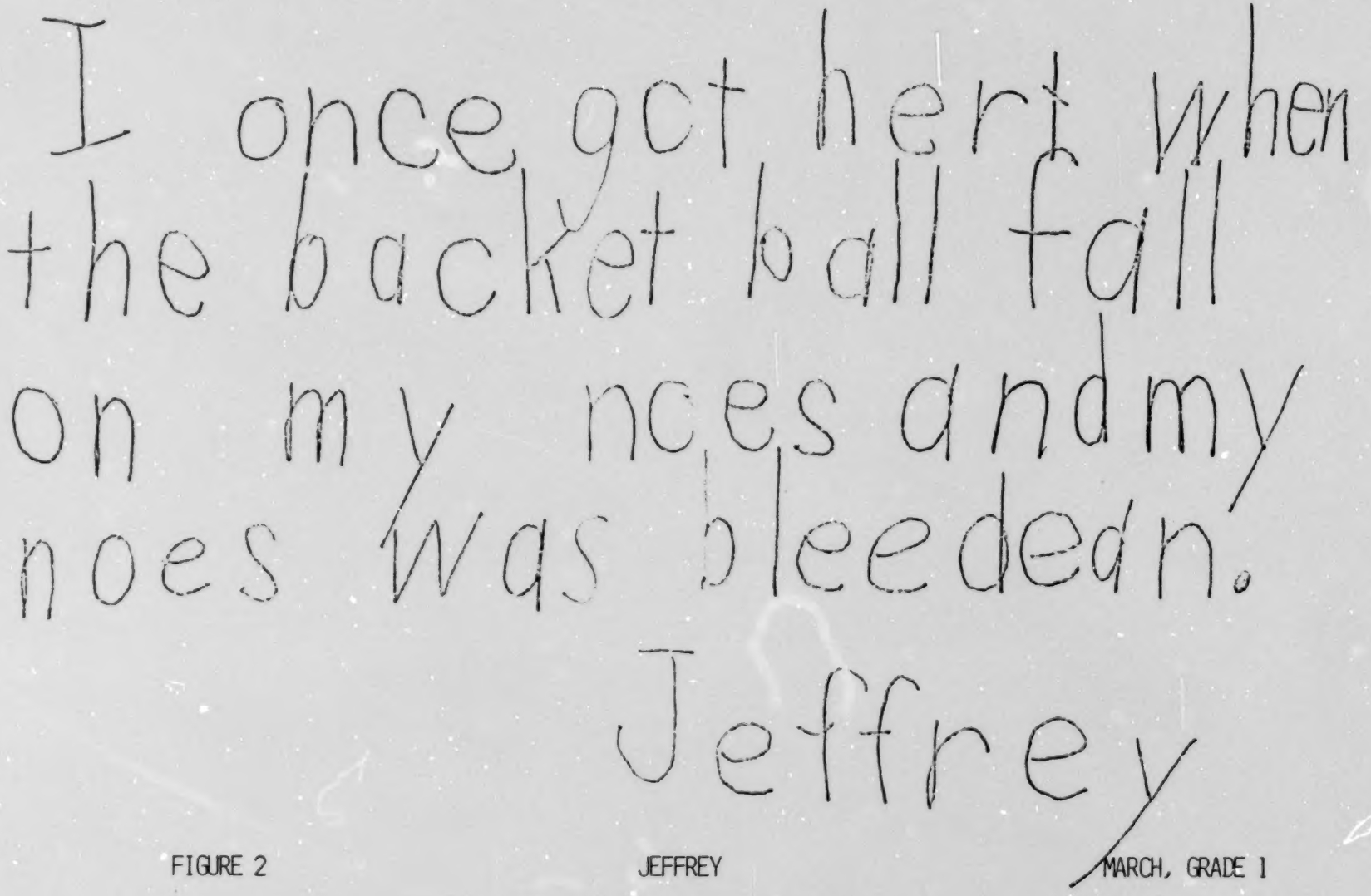


FIGURE 2 JEFFREY MARCH, GRADE 1

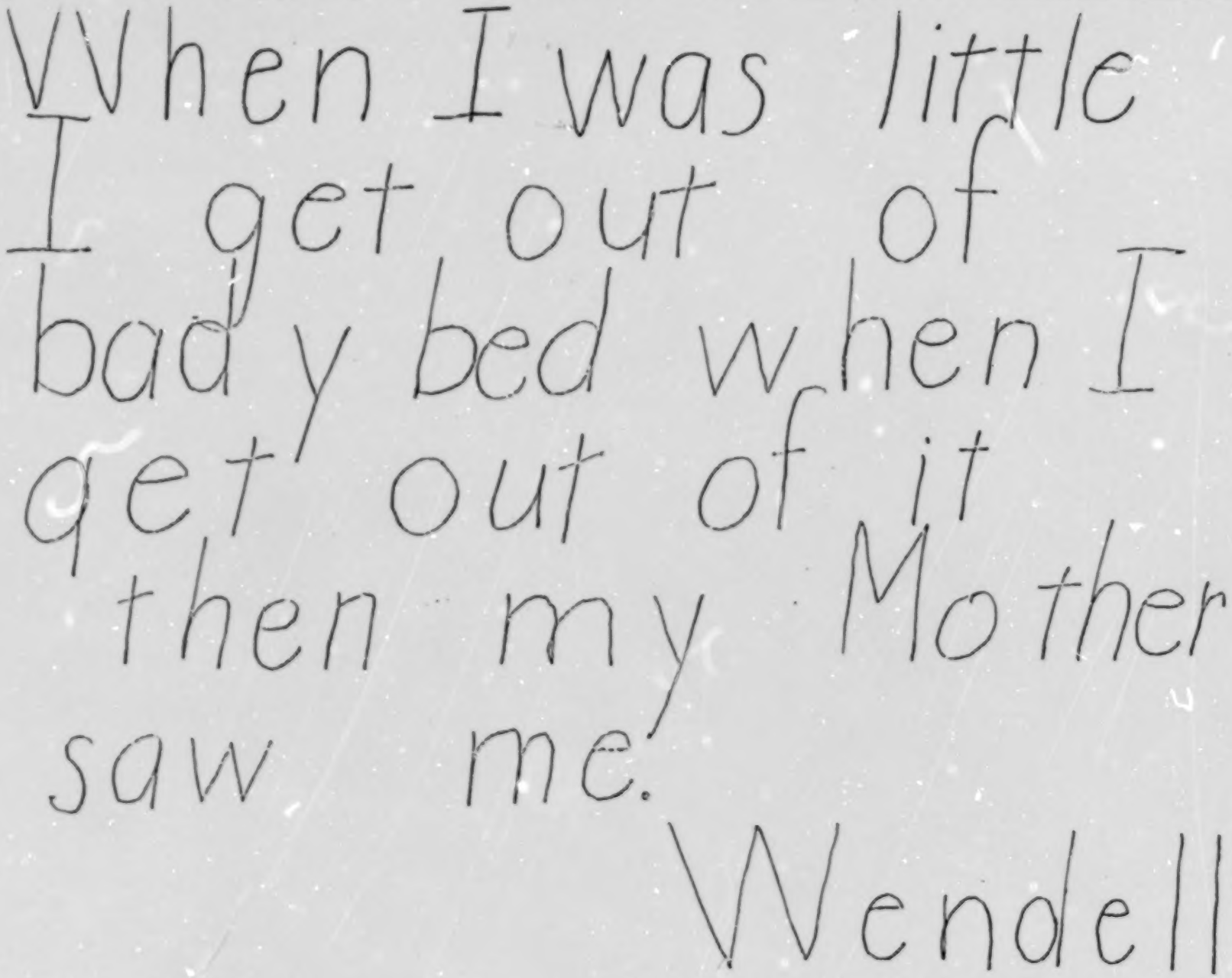


FIGURE 3 WENDELL MARCH, GRADE 1

(INSERT FIGURES 4 AND 5 HERE)

I was familiar with the work of Maria Montessori, Marie Clay, and Carol Chomsky, but I had never considered the implications of this work for elementary classrooms. Now I realized the connection between the work of these three pioneers and the recent work of Donald Graves, Stephen Judy, Peter Elbow, Yetta and Ken Goodman, and Shirley Haley-James and her NCTE Committee on Teaching Written Composition in Elementary Schools. What I sense now is a major shift in the whole paradigm for teaching writing in the schools based on the work of these people and many others. If such a shift is occurring, here are some of the bases for it.

Some Things We Know About Early Writing and Beginning Writers

1. The process of literacy learning (learning to write and read) begins between ages two and five. (Clay, 1975; DeFord, 1980; Harste and Burke, 1980; Montessori, 1957: See Standing) At this stage children are learning about written language naturally from the print in their environments just as they have been learning oral language naturally from the talk in their environments.
2. All children can learn to write. (Applebee, 1981; Graves, 1982: See Walshe; Mellon, 1981; Montessori, 1957: See Standing)
3. All children want to learn to write. (Burrows, 1939; Cazden, 1981; Graves, 1978; King and Rentel, 1979)
4. Children want to write right. During these early years writing improves without direct teaching. (Clay, 1975; Goodman and Goodman, 1981; Hildreth, 1936; King and Rentel, 1979; Milz, 1981; Wheeler, 1971)

I Dont woid tow mofe
boKus You wos mne in I
cnbeT Kus Yougotow
The his biu sau

OCTOBER

APRIL

Thecat
the Cat gatchase
By The dogs he
didn't not get rand over
But hegatdrdy cot By The
dog

lov antonio

.L
and boslook at hmandhop
Westsunmunday

OCTOBER

APRIL

Ernest

the cat went under a car
the Doys was catching the cat
the man caught the cat

FIGURE 5 ERNEST GRADE 2

5. Time on task is related to learning. As James Atwater has written, "You learn to write by writing. A lot of writing."[5] Haley-James, 1981; NCTE, 1979; Smith, 1981)

6. In general elementary and secondary schools do not provide adequate opportunities for writing. (Graves, 1978; Applebee, 1981; Filion, 1979; Maeroff, 1981; The Sloan Foundation, 1977: See Koerner; Whiteman, 1981)

7. By age five to six children know that they can write. (Clay, 1975; Graves, 1978)

8. Teacher expectations are related to learning. "We underestimate the capacity of pupils at almost every stage of education from the primary school through the university."[6] (Graves, 1982: See Brandt.) Many teachers of five and six year olds assume that they cannot write.

9. Writing contributes to the development of reading and thinking skills. "Some children learn to read by writing."[7] (Bissex, 1980; Clay, 1975; Graves, 1978; Hoskisson, 1979; The Sloan Foundation, 1977: See Koerner)

10. When communication skills are allowed to develop naturally, writing precedes reading for some children (probably many, perhaps all). (Bissex, 1980; Chomsky, 1971; Graves, 1978; Montessori, 1957: See Standing)

The early dates for some of the preceding indicate that in many cases, this is not new knowledge. What is new is combining these into a framework for writing programs in elementary schools, using what we know to develop new strategies for teaching writing.

In the fall of 1980 I began a one-year informal study of the teaching of writing in grades one and two in one small elementary school. I was particularly interested in collecting some samples of first-grade writing early in the school year, and I wanted to see what effects practice, frequent writing without teacher correction, would have on the improvement of writing. In this study we collected writing samples from all pupils at each grade level in October and in May. We also collected all of the writing of 12 children, six in grade one and six in grade two.

On the October and May samples we looked at five factors: general impression (as determined by holistic scoring), length (number of words), vocabulary (number of different words), spelling (proportion of words spelled correctly) and syntactic development (number of T-Units and words per T-Unit).

The five teachers (three first-grade and two second-grade) who volunteered to participate in the study were all experienced primary-grade teachers. They readily admitted that they had not been providing frequent opportunities for their pupils to write, but they were willing to try this approach.

The Results

All the first graders but one produced meaningful texts on the first writing assignment in late September or early October.

(INSERT FIGURES 6, 7 AND 8 HERE)

David, the one child who didn't produce text in September, was producing meaningful text a few months later.

(INSERT FIGURES 9 AND 10 HERE)

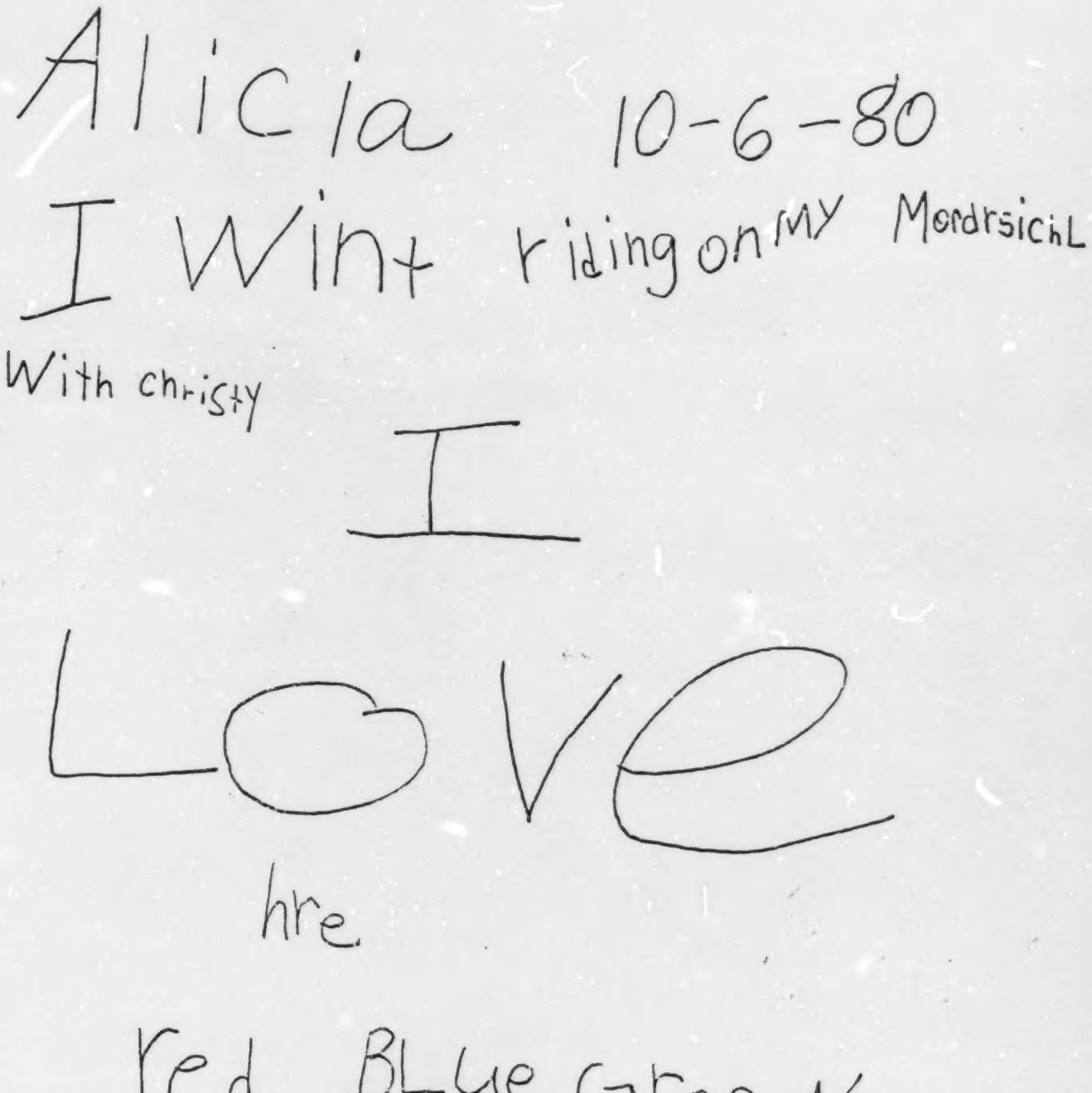


FIGURE 6 ALICIA OCTOBER, GRADE 1

Christy 10-6-80

I went wood cutting yesterday. With my Mom's and Dad's friends the Remmers. I had a good time there.

the end!

FIGURE 7

CHRISTY

OCTOBER, GRADE 1

Fiora
Mi favrit Color
is Salmon
and red and geer
BLck it is prite
Color

FIGURE 8

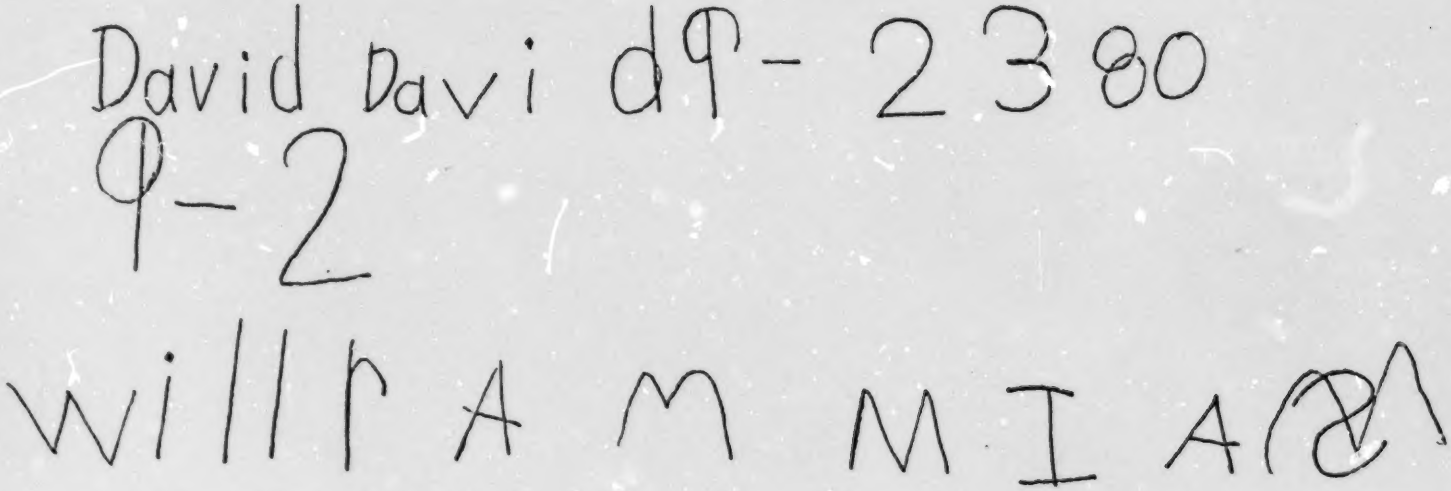


FIGURE 9 DAVID SEPTEMBER, GRADE 1

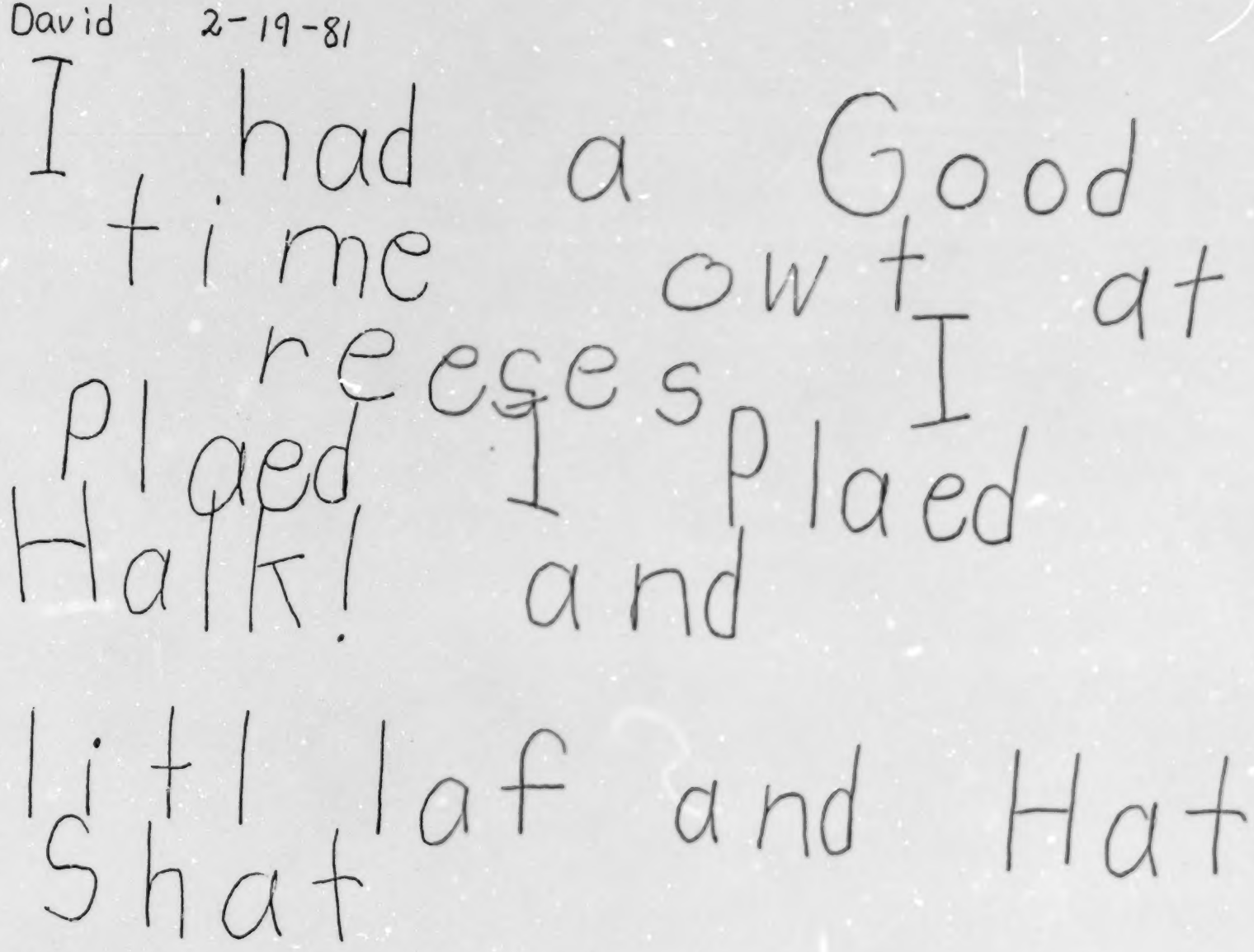


FIGURE 10 DAVID FEBRUARY, GRADE 1

The improvement at both grade levels in all categories measured was significant. While it is impossible to determine how much of this improvement was due to practice and how much to maturation and other factors, it is interesting to note that the first-grade averages in May were higher than the second-grade averages in October on all measures.

(INSERT TABLE I HERE)

At both grade levels children spell the majority of words they use in writing correctly. Even though the number of words used and the different words used more than doubled between October and May, the proportion of words spelled correctly increased. On the average first graders spelled 68% of the words they wrote in October correctly and 77% in May. Second graders spelled 84% correctly in October and 89% in May. Since there was no teacher correction involved, the results in spelling demonstrate a rather remarkable determination on the part of these children to write right.

(INSERT FIGURE 11 HERE)

The most interesting result of this study was the startling variation in the amount of writing that individual children wrote from day to day. A child might write only a few words one day and then a hundred or more the next. These peak productions when a child wrote much more than on previous occasions seemed to have some common characteristics. First, the child obviously had a lot more to say (write). The topics tended, but only slightly so, to be student-determined topics rather than teacher-suggested topics. The writing appeared to be of higher quality--more interesting,

Table I. Effects of Practice on Improvement in Writing*

	Grade 1 (49 subjects)		Grade 2 (40 subjects)	
	October	May	October	May
General Impression	1.94	2.55	2.20	2.50
Length (in words)	11.26	28.14	18.80	49.17
Vocabulary	9.16	20.45	15.35	34.82
Spelling	7.67	21.14	15.80	43.72
Syntax (Number of T-Units)	1.53	3.90	2.20	6.92

*Using SPSS statistical analysis, all gains were significant beyond the .01 level.

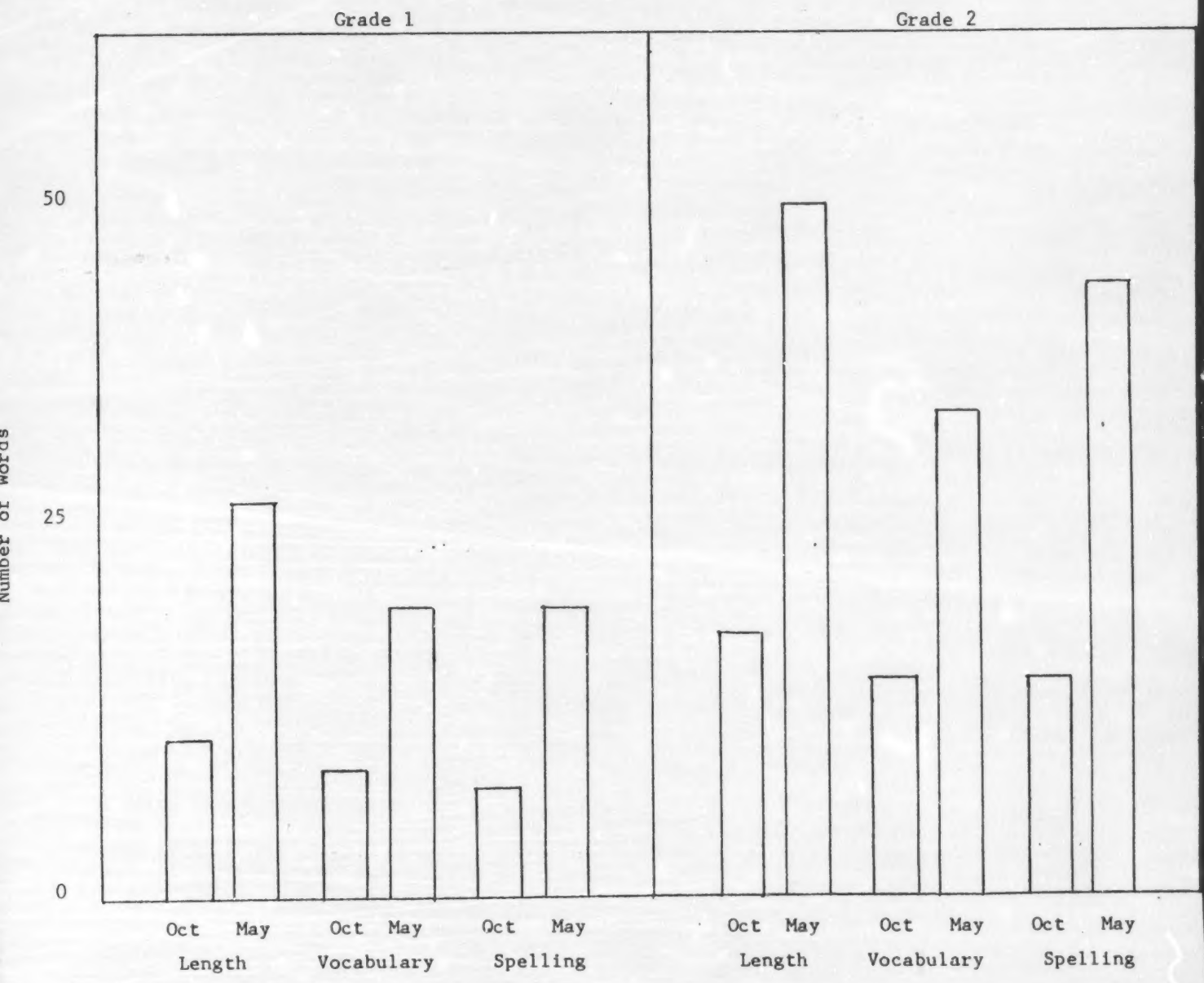


Figure 11. Length, Vocabulary and Spelling

more complex syntax, more words spelled correctly, etc. The occurrence of these peaks was unpredictable.

(INSERT FIGURES 12, 13, AND 14 HERE)

Conclusions from an Informal Study of Frequent Writing Without Teacher Correction in Grades One and Two

1. Many first graders can write well at the beginning of the school year.
2. Many first grade teachers are unaware of this and assume that their students cannot write until they are taught to write.
3. Teachers in the early years of school (K-2) have low expectations for their students' writing abilities.
4. As a result, children in the early grades have few opportunities to write in school.
5. Practice, frequent writing without teacher correction, produces significant improvement in writing in grades one and two.
6. Children in grades one and two spell correctly the majority of words they use in writing.
7. The quantity of writing by children shows incredible variations from day to day even when environmental conditions are carefully controlled. For example, one second grader wrote four words one day and 199 the next. Another wrote 168 words one day and 8 the next.

How Can Teachers Best Serve Young Writers?

Earlier I mentioned a major shift in the paradigm for teaching writing in the schools. This shift is based primarily on our increasing

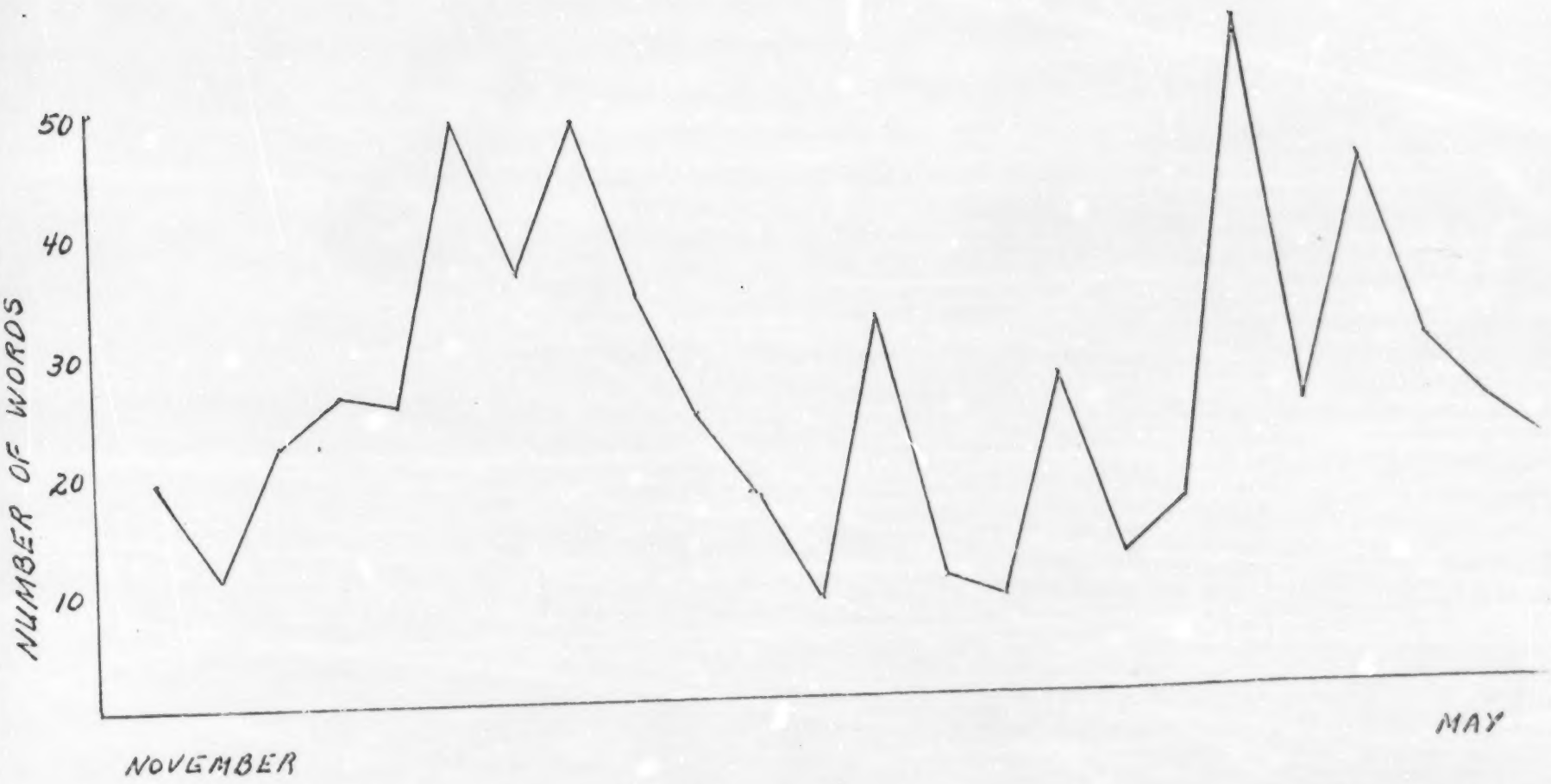


FIGURE 12 THERESA GRADE 1

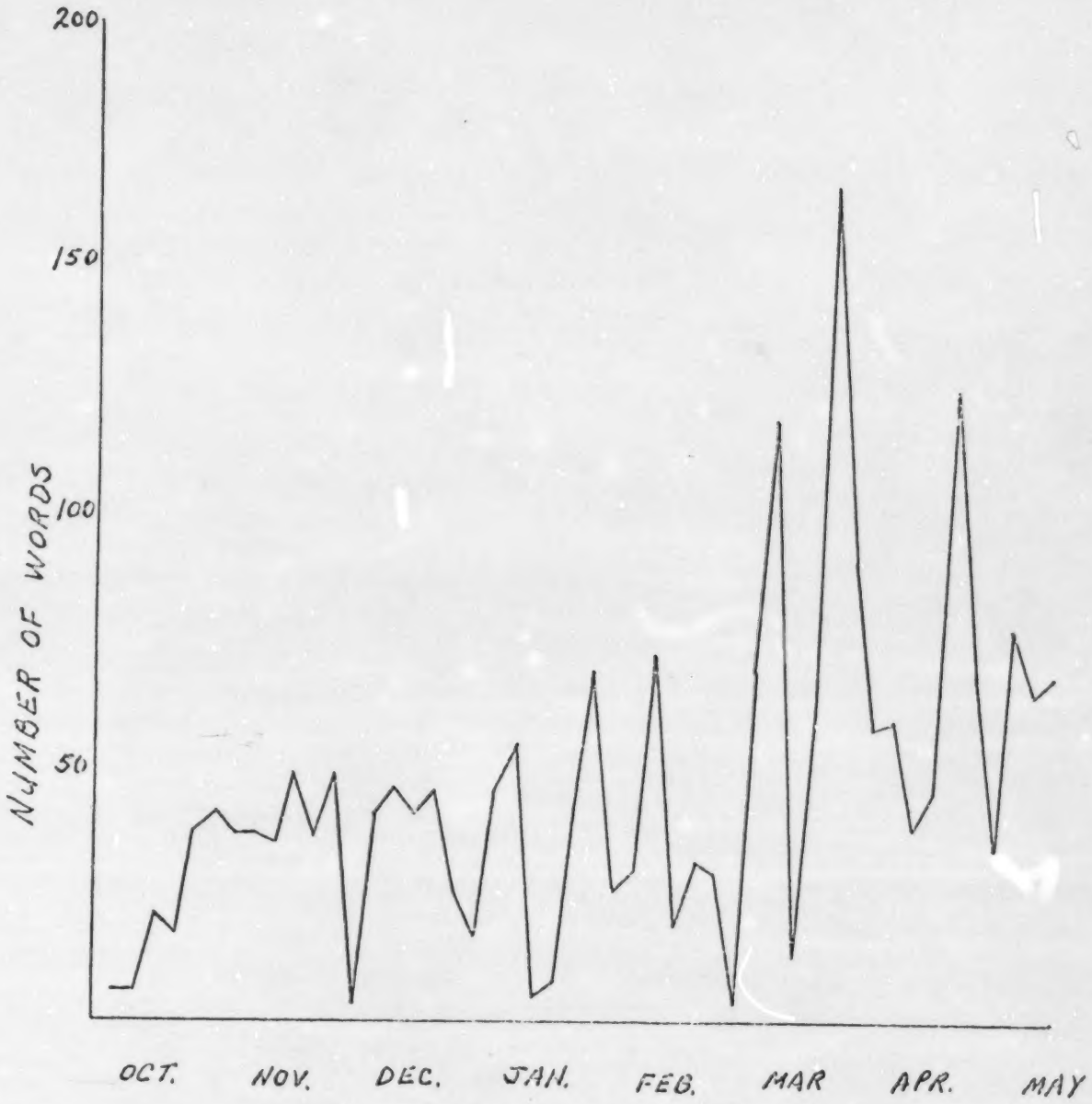


FIGURE 13

IAN

GRADE 2

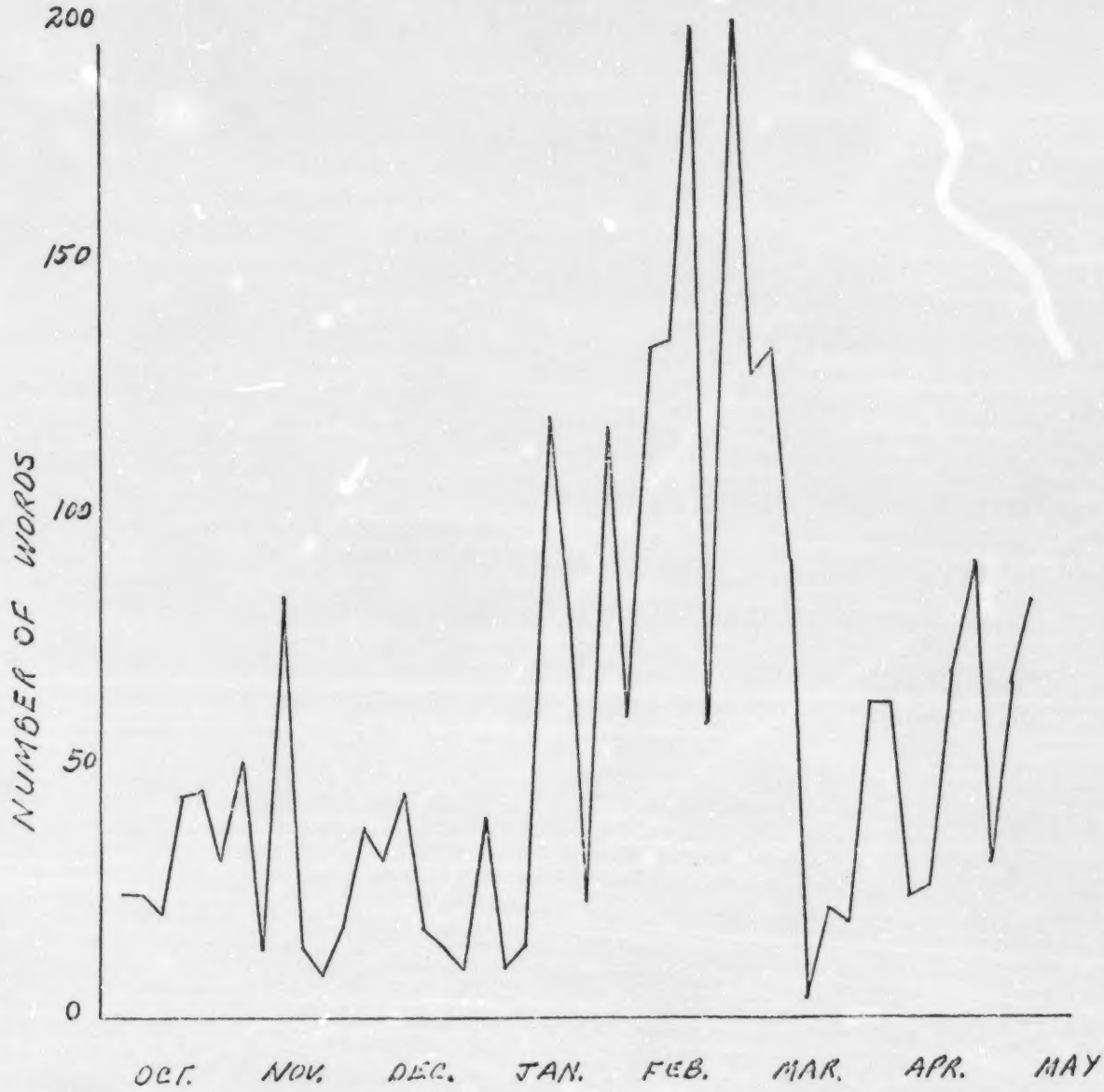


FIGURE 14 DANIEL GRADE 2

knowledge of how children learn language. From birth on all children are actively engaged in language learning. All children learn to talk through interaction with the oral language around them. All children can learn to write naturally by interaction with the written language in their environments.

Language learning is incredibly complex. Literacy begins with 52 capital and lower case letters plus numerals, punctuation marks, and other signs and symbols. Letters are combined into words; words are combined into meaningful utterances and sentences. The English language includes hundreds of thousands of words, and its users make several thousand syntactic transformations in normal everyday language usage.

The beginner at written language is learning several thousand things about language concurrently. Children learn language, oral and written, with remarkable efficiency developing their own strategies and sequences and on their own time tables, all without direct instruction. No adult could do this. And no adult can really understand the child's miraculous capacity to acquire language. No teacher nor parent, no matter how well meaning, can teach beginning writing as effectively and efficiently as children are teaching themselves.

The role of the teacher in the literacy learning process is crucial, much more important than previously thought. Just as infants learned oral language by babbling in the cradle and by talking to themselves and to available others, children need lots of opportunities to babble on paper, to write for themselves and to available others. They need lots of letting alone: to think, to write, to observe written language,

to play with writing

and the written word, to learn to write by trial and error, to think about their reading, to think about their writing (and language), to think about thinking, to explore their world through observation, thought, and composition.

Since children in first grade are already writing and are all learning to write and to write right, the role of the teacher is not to teach beginning writing; rather it is to nurture beginning writers.

Teachers who intervene in this natural process, teachers who respond to form rather than to meaning, teachers who call attention to error, teachers who focus on correction are unknowingly crippling beginning writers.

As children have more opportunities to write, they become more careful observers of written language. Just as a pig farmer looks at pigs differently than a plumber would, so the practicing writer views written language differently than the non-writer. Right now in many elementary schools the children who need opportunities to write the most for linguistic development, for cognitive development, and for literacy learning, are seldom given opportunities to write. This includes all children in grades K through three, children in urban schools, children in minority groups, the children of the poor, and children assigned to low or remedial classes.

What Can Teachers Do?

1. Provide lots of opportunities for writing and give children lots of letting alone. Daily writing of 20 to 30 minutes is minimal. Provide a variety of experiences with all types of writing.

2. Don't correct beginning writers. By correction and criticism we show children that they can't write while they are trying to learn to write. (Can you imagine parents criticizing their child's first attempt to walk?) Young children are already self-correcting their writing with incredible efficiency. We want them to maintain the responsibility for this. Teacher correction takes this responsibility out of their hands and puts it in the teacher's hands. Please note I am not opposed to correct writing, and I would never tell children that spelling or punctuation, or any other convention isn't important. The best way to get correct writing is by making it clear that it is the writer's responsibility. Since all children want to write right, we have no problems here until teachers create them.

3. Provide a supportive, encouraging environment for writing. Children want to share their writing. They are not seeking praise unless we have taught them to seek praise. They are seeking honest response and real questions.

   Respond to meaning, not to form. "John, I see you have written about your father's new truck." Ask real questions: "What color is it?" "How does it feel when you sit in it?"

   React to writing as supportive parents would react to walking and talking. Parents tend to prize learning behavior: to cherish it, to enjoy it, to honor it. Teachers tend to appraise learning behavior: to judge, to evalute, to correct, to define it as good or bad. My hunch is that children and others learn better and faster under prizing than under appraising.

   Make the class a receptive, supportive audience by sharing writing prudently. Never show or share writing that would be embarrassing.

4. Provide a rich variety of reading experiences. Read to children. Let them read to each other. Let them read each other's writing. Provide encounters with a wide variety of print: books, poems, stories, magazines, newspapers, travel folders, advertisements, menus, etc.
5. Monitor progress in writing. The best way to do this is by keeping each day's writing, dated in the student's folder. This way teacher, student, parent and anyone else can see the improvement that always occurs as children write frequently.
6. Nurturing vs. teaching is not a question of method or technique. It is primarily a difference in the attitude of the teacher. Frequent writing under the careful encouragement of a supportive teacher fosters the desire to write, the desire to improve one's writing, a positive attitude toward writing and toward learning to write, and a positive concept of self as writer.

FOOTNOTES

1. Evelyn Robinson, "Let's Stop Dissecting the Curriculum," Educational Leadership, 37:7, April, 1980, p. 574.
2. Education USA, "Writing Gets Leftover Class Time," March 23, 1981, p. 236.
3. Timothy Shanahan, "The Writing Crisis: A Survey and a Solution," Phi Delta Kappan, 61:3, November, 1979, p. 216.
4. Donald Graves, "We Won't Let Them Write," Language Arts, 55:5, May, 1978, p. 636.
5. James Atwater, Better Testing, Better Writing. The Ford Foundation, 1981, p. 3.
6. Charles Eliot, "Shortening and Enriching the Grammar School Course," NEA Addresses and Proceedings, 1892, p. 617.
7. L.G.W. Sealey and Vivian Gibbon, Communication and Learning in the Primary School. (Blackwell and Mott, 1962), Schocken, 1972, p. 110.

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